Great Transition Campaign

Society on Strike

GTC Roundtable

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In 2026, we face a deepening turn toward Barbarization scenarios, the long-anticipated reaction to Conventional Worlds in crisis. As far-right authoritarian forces grow across countries and work to dismantle systems of democratic accountability, the question becomes, what tools become available to steer us away from descent and toward a Great Transition?

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Contributions

Opening Essay

Society on Strike: A Last Defense Against Tyranny? by Jeremy Brecher 1

Forum

Gwendolyn Hallsmith 9

Tim Hollo 12

Bonn Juego 14

Ben Manski 20

Francine Mestrum 27

Valentine M. Moghadam 31

Ronaldo Munck 34

William Robinson 38

Antonio Roman-Alcalá 44

Guy Standing 49

Noha Tarek Hassan 54

Biljana Vankovska 57

Author's Response

Response to Comments by Jeremy Brecher 61

Society on Strike: A Last Defense Against Tyranny?

Opening Essay for a GTC Forum

Jeremy Brecher

Donald Trump ended his first term in office in 2021 by supporting an insurrection that attempted to overturn the election results. Four years later, after securing a return to the White House, Donald Trump and his accomplices are waging war against both US democracy and society. This is manifest in their executive usurpation, seizing all the powers of the government and concentrating them in the personal will of the President. It involves the elimination of bases of opposition, not only in the agencies of government but also in civil society, including universities, trade unions, and media. It is revealed in storm trooper violence, as unidentified armed masked men invade communities and workplaces, seizing people with no legal justification. It is seen in government actions that punish opponents and provide billions of dollars of benefits to supporters.

In response, opposition to the MAGA assault on society is growing.[1] It is developing in the electoral system, reflected in the rise of New York City's new democratic socialist mayor Zohran Mamdani and upset victories in special elections across the country. Resistance is growing in the streets as seen in the massive nonviolent direct action to protect immigrant neighborhoods from attacks by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and in the seven million who turned out for No Kings Day to protest the administration's abuses of power. This opposition, if it continues to grow, could undermine MAGA power and conceivably at some point remove Trump and his associates from office.

Still, what about a worst-case scenario where electoral and non-electoral opposition is insufficient to limit MAGA tyranny? Where democratic procedures and the right to vote have

been so denied that it is impossible to defeat MAGA at the polls? Where official and vigilante violence are unrestrained by law? Where many remain bamboozled by lies and distraction? Where all dissent has been effectively branded as treason? Where those who don't go along with the program are subject to harassment, beating, jailing, and death? And where much of the population has been driven by fear into silence and acquiescence? How do we resist the MAGA juggernaut under such conditions?

Tyrannical regimes from Serbia to the Philippines to Brazil and other countries have been brought down by large-scale nonviolent direct action that made society ungovernable. While the US has a rich history of social and labor movements using mass action and local general strikes, it does not have a tradition of using people power for the defense of democracy. However, in other countries where democratic institutions have been so weakened or eliminated that they are unable to halt tyranny, such methods have emerged and been used effectively. They are known by such monikers as nonviolent uprisings, people power, general strikes, political strikes, and, as I will refer to them here, social strikes.

Social strikes express power that inheres in the fundamental dependence of ruling groups on those they rule—a reality emphasized by both Marx and Gandhi. Social strikes cause a problem for the owners and managers of the businesses and institutions that they shut down. They appeal to and mobilize a wide public by embodying its values and interests in opposition to the regime. They demonstrate that the authorities depend on the cooperation and acquiescence of those they rule, and that they are vulnerable to the non-cooperation of the population.

Social Strikes in American History

From the outset of the Trump regime, calls for mass disruptive action started coming from unlikely sources. When asked in an interview what would happen if the Trump administration systematically defied court orders, Anthony Romero, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union, an organization normally associated with legal action through the courts, replied, "Then we've got to take to the streets in a different way. We've got to shut down this country."[2] Similarly, senior Democratic representative Jim McGovern said, "We can't just sit back and let our democracy just fall apart. What we need to think about are things like maybe a national strike across this country."[3] Sara

Nelson, head of the Association of Flight Attendants, said that American workers—no matter what they do or what sector they are in—now have very few options but to "join together to organize for a general strike."[4] On the mass calls of anti-MAGA groups, the question of general strikes and other popular action is continually raised.

Calling for general strikes is a staple of the radical toolkit. Indeed, I have called for one several times myself. But why is the idea of such mass actions now voiced so widely? There are three principal reasons:

- **Widespread Harm**: The Trump administration's policies have been inflicting broad-based economic suffering already, giving credibility to actions based on mobilizing diverse publics.

- **Weakened Institutions**: The demolition of key institutions of democracy, constitutionalism, and the rule of law threatens to leave few alternatives to popular uprising.

- **Insufficient Opposition**: The leadership failure of the Democratic Party to effectively oppose the emerging MAGA tyranny has led to despair over the weak resistance within the institutions of representative government.

These undeniable realities compel people to think in unaccustomed ways. Are there precedents in US history from which they can learn?

As noted, the US has little tradition of using popular "civil resistance" for the defense of democracy. However, the country has seen at least half-a-dozen phases of intense class conflict like those the German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg called "periods of mass strike."[5] These have gone far beyond the withdrawal of labor power that conventionally defines a strike to include mass picketing, occupation of workplaces and government buildings, nonviolent direct action, shutdowns of commerce, blocking of traffic, and other disruption of everyday activities. Mass strikes have often been met with severe repression, including violent conflict with company guards, police, state militias, and the US Army.

The US has also seen a handful of actions that fit the classical definition of a "general strike" as a coordinated work stoppage by trade unions in many different sectors. Notably, in 1886, a strike for the eight-hour day evolved into a general strike in Chicago and other locations. Since then, there have been a handful of general strikes in individual cities, for example Seattle in 1919, San Francisco in 1934, and Oakland, California, and Stamford, Connecticut in 1946. All have been sympathetic strikes in support of unions in struggles with their employers.

Such union-called general strikes, however, have been rare in US labor history. American unions are bound by laws specifically designed to prevent them from taking part in strikes about issues outside their own workplace. In most cases their contracts include "no-strike" language that bans them from striking during the contract. Unions that violate these prohibitions are subject to crushing fines and loss of bargaining rights. Their leaders can be—and have been—packed off to jail.

Strikes for specific political purposes, such as affecting legislation or deposing political leaders, are common in other countries. In March 2025 alone, there were general strikes in Belgium, Argentina, Serbia, and South Korea—all directed against government austerity policies or, in the case of South Korea, unconstitutional seizure of government power.

Social Strikes vs. MAGA Tyranny

What if MAGA rule so dismantles the institutions of representative democracy that normal institutional processes are insufficient to overcome tyranny? Around the world, general strikes, "people power" uprisings, and other forms of "social strikes" have overthrown violent, armed dictatorships. What conditions might put social strikes on the agenda in the United States?

Intense Public Dissatisfaction. Growing disaffection of the population might lead to a "great repudiation" by a large majority. As a study a century ago noted, "strike conditions are conditions of mind."[6] Social strikes are unlikely to happen before a large fraction of the population is enraged at the MAGA tyranny, dubious that more moderate forms of action will suffice, and willing to take personal and institutional risks to oppose it.

Increased Organization. Growing self-organization and capacity to act by the movement-based opposition, and forces of social self-defense more broadly, might reach a tipping point. This would require cooperation among national organizations and networks. But more important is local organization, formal or informal, that is able to act and coordinate with others. Such networks need to be able to persist despite pervasive repression.

Escalation Tactics. Actions by the movement-based opposition that win wide popular support and participation could provide "exemplary actions" that visibly oppose the harm the regime is doing and show that people can stand up and resist, thereby laying the groundwork for mass participation in social strikes.

Divisions within the Regime. As Abraham Lincoln (and the Bible) observed, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." A divided regime is less able to engage in a strategy of either consistent repression or manipulative concessions. Similarly, every regime depends on the support of its supporters, whether in the form of campaign contributors, propagandists, or soldiers, police, and other agents of repression. Turning points in civil resistance in the Philippines, Serbia, and many other cases came when police and soldiers opposed a coup or refused to fire on protestors.

Regime Intransigence. The powerful defeat challenges to their power through a combination of repression and concession. A ruling force may appear strong because it never backs down, but in the long-term such pig-headedness is likely to force more and more of society into opposition.

Failure of Other Tactics. Many people, quite reasonably, prefer conventional forms of institutional resistance to ameliorate their conditions rather than risky ventures like social strikes. The failure of less drastic forms of resistance often lays the groundwork for social strikes.

Although such conditions for social strikes do not currently exist in the US, harbingers may point toward their emergence. For example, millions of people have participated in a series of days of action opposing MAGA autocracy and its Gestapo tactics; its decimation of food, housing, and healthcare for millions of Americans; and its destruction of our climate and environment. Polls demonstrate that a majority of the public has increasingly opposed such Trump initiatives.

Laying the Groundwork for Social Strikes

Although social strikes can seem to emerge suddenly and unexpectedly, they are often preceded by less visible organizing efforts and smaller-scale actions. With the Democratic Party currently failing to effectively act as an opposition party, there is an important role for a "non-electoral opposition" that can mobilize those harmed by MAGA, identify common interests, unify their programs and actions, and articulate alternatives. A movement-based opposition has come into play since Trump's election, exemplified by the participation of millions in protest days of action like Hands Off!, MayDayStrong, and No Kings Day, and the mass civil resistance to ICE raids, the National Guard occupation in Los Angeles, the ICE occupation of Minneapolis, and other abuses across the country. That opposition is part of a developmental process that could, depending on circumstances, culminate in social strikes. "One Million Rising," launched by the progressive, anti-Trump group Indivisible as "a national effort to train one million people in the strategic logic and practice of non-cooperation," could be a step in preparing participants in mass protests for social strikes.[7]

Ongoing social self-defense can increasingly incorporate elements of noncooperation and disruption that evolve toward social strikes and serve as living representations of their potential power. They can combine strikes with non-workplace actions like boycotts, commercial shutdowns, mass picketing, blockades, occupations, and civil disobedience. Actions will constantly need to seek the "sweet spot" between effective disruption of MAGA oppression and alienation of forces that might otherwise be won over.

Successful social strikes generally depend on support from sources of power that go far beyond established social movements. They require—and often acquire—support from sectors like educational, medical, and legal professionals; civil society institutions like universities, hospitals, and religious denominations; and political forces including local and state governments, legislators, judges, jurors, sectors of government agencies and security forces, and segments of political parties. Such forces often join social strikes not out of fondness for social movements, but from a growing understanding that coming together to vanquish an autocracy may be necessary for both their own self-preservation and the preservation of society itself.

Prospects

It is difficult to envision concretely what social strikes would mean in the context of the struggle against Trumpian autocracy. We can presume that growing rage at Trump's depredations may so manifest itself at some point in some form, but what form will depend on many unknowns: what the regime might do, what the people might do, what institutions might do.

By far the two largest outpourings of popular protest in recent decades in the US were Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter. Almost no one anticipated either of these movements, and the forms they took were very different from each other and from previous forms of action in the US or, indeed, elsewhere in the world. In such a context of unpredictability, preconceived plans and assumptions can not only be wrong but also disorganizing. Any attempt to shape such events needs to start by recognizing their uniqueness.

The detailed timelines of social strikes cannot be known in advance. They are likely to grow out of a gradual and not always visible buildup of harm—and resentment at harm. This is already occurring in Trump's America. It could lead to a series of escalating struggles, possibly punctuated by defeats or by concessions generating temporary calm. Popular opposition could also diminish as a result of repression, MAGA counter-maneuvers, a sense of futility, or other "unknown unknowns." A period of apparent quiescence with a rising sense of grievance might lead to a sudden explosion of popular rage and a mass uprising. Whether gradually or rapidly, social strikes will need to develop the necessary strength to reduce MAGA power enough to bring an end to its rule—through elections, collapse of political support, or social disruption.

Resisting the rise of tyranny no doubt requires sacrifice. After all, we are dealing with an aspiring tyrant who already sends armed, masked agents into farms, restaurants, and neighborhoods to brutalize workers and their supporters; endorses the roughing-up and arrest of elected political opponents; and lionizes foreign leaders who shoot down demonstrators in the street. But that sacrifice will not be primarily on behalf of one political party vs. another. It will be a defense of democracy—defense of government of the people, by the people, and for the people. It is defense of the human rights of all people; of the conditions of our earth and its climate that make our life

About the Author

Jeremy Brecher is a historian of social movements and a co-founder of the Labor Network for Sustainability. He is the author of the *Climate Insurgency Trilogy* and *Common Preservation in a Time of Mutual Destruction*.

Gwendolyn Hallsmith

On March 5, AFSCME Local 1343 signed an agreement with the City of Burlington, Vermont, "recognizing the Union's right to engage in a General Strike to defend democracy (should such a strike be called for and ratified by AFSCME Council 93 or the Vermont AFL-CIO)." Their letter of agreement does not nullify the Taft Hartley Act of 1947, which limits unions from engaging in "political strikes," but it does offer union members some assurance that if they do strike to defend democracy, they will not be fired.

In his essay on social strikes, Jeremy Brecher alludes to the risks of strikes when he says that mass strikes "have often been met with severe repression, including violent conflict with company guards, police, state militias, and the US Army." He goes on to say that "Resisting the rise of tyranny no doubt requires sacrifice. After all, we are dealing with an aspiring tyrant who already sends armed, masked agents into farms, restaurants, and neighborhoods to brutalize workers and their supporters; endorses the roughing-up and arrest of elected political opponents; and lionizes foreign leaders who shoot down demonstrators in the street."

Here are a few examples of the severe repression and sacrifice faced by strikers:

The Ludlow Massacre in Colorado in 1914 was named for the time when the Colorado National Guard and private security hired by the coal company part-owned by John D. Rockefeller Jr. attacked a tent encampment where the strikers were living and killed twenty-one people, primarily women and children.

The Seattle General Strike of 1919 started when 65,000 ship workers walked off the job to protest low wages. When the federal government threatened to terminate the contracts to build ships if higher wages were granted, the strike spread to 110 locals. The mayor responded by deploying 950 sailors and marines, adding 600 people to the local police force, and hiring 2,400 special deputies. The general strike ended because the leaders felt outgunned by both

the security forces and the media. Immediately afterward, thirty-nine IWW members were arrested for being "ringleaders of anarchy."

The Battle of Blair Mountain in 1921 was the largest labor uprising in US history, where 10,000 armed coal miners faced 3,000 coal company security and strikebreakers. It started in August and ended in September when federal troops arrived. It was a huge loss for the union: 985 miners were indicted for murder, conspiracy to commit murder, accessory to murder, and treason against West Virginia. Union membership plummeted and didn't come back until the Depression.

In 1946, there were approximately 5,000 strikes across the country, and the more than one hundred cities experienced at least ten work stoppages. At one point, there were 1.6 million workers on strike, with a total of 4.6 million workers having been on strike by the end of the year.[1] This was the backdrop for the Taft Hartley Act. For all the self-congratulations we have seen for the turnout for the Hands Off!, May Day Strong, and No Kings marches, the resistance in Minnesota, and other acts of rebellion, nothing yet comes close to our own labor history in terms of resolve and sacrifice.

Nonviolent resistance is actually the only way tyrants have been stopped through internal pressure; unfortunately, when it comes to the type of fascism rising in the United States, the way it has been stopped before is through the horror of a world at war. While the examples Brecher cites in Serbia, Philippines, and Brazil are hopeful, the MAGA cult is a different animal than a small minority of strongmen facing widespread majority opposition.

The cult is indoctrinated and informed by an oligarch-controlled media; the dueling narratives and mass social delusion in the United States prevent the kind of widespread organizing and awareness required for the resistance we need. It turns out that the means of communication and control are more important than the means of production, yet the effectiveness of strikes hinges on production being central. The Seattle General Strike was not brought to its knees by all the troops and police; it failed because they lost the contest for public opinion.

This is not to say that I am opposed to people organizing a general strike to stop Trump and his

ring of organized criminals. I just think that we are naïve to imagine that effective resistance will not be met with increasing violence, increasing incarceration, and increasing tyranny. How many people will have the courage to face that remains to be seen. So far, the large turnouts have been on Saturdays, where people show up for one day with no risk of arrest or violence—except perhaps in Minnesota and LA. If any of that posed even a small threat to the fascist powers now holding the reins in Washington, you can bet there would have been more done to stop it. We can already see this in how they are trying to stop the elections in November.

The oligarchs, the people with hundreds of millions and billions of dollars to burn, have much more staying power than union workers who need their pay to put dinner on the table. Strikes have limited power as a tactic, especially in an environment where unionized workers hold an increasingly limited percentage of the total labor force, from 35% in 1945 to 10.3% today.[2] Noncooperation needs to go deeper than that. We need to find effective ways to undermine Fox News and all the major networks controlled by cult members, to establish parallel and successful lifeways that can exist outside of the dominant culture, and to end the grip the cult worldview has on the majority of Americans.

Endnotes

1. US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Work Stoppages Caused by Labor-Management Disputes in 1946: Bulletin No. 918* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1947), https://www.bls.gov/wsp/publications/annual-summaries/pdf/work-stoppages-1946.pdf.

2. Paula Romero and Julie Whittaker, *A Brief Examination of Union Membership Data* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2023), https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R47596.

About the Author

Gwendolyn Hallsmith is the founder and executive director of Global Community Initiatives. She is the author of six books on sustainable community development and has worked all over the world to foster local economies, good governance, and healthy ecosystems. She founded Vermonters for a New Economy to work on economic solutions at the state level, and the Headwaters Garden and Learning Center, an ecovillage in Cabot, VT. She has a master's degree in Public Policy from Brown University.

Tim Hollo

Resistance is futile. Direct action is fertile.

There is a crucial framing question implied in Jeremy Brecher's important and usefu essay that needs to be teased out.

Brecher writes about the "worst-case scenario" of the system we inherited not working. He asks, "What if... the normal institutional processes are insufficient?"

The approach we might take fundamentally shifts if we recognize that we are already there. That it is not about "defending democracy," but about recognizing that the weak democratic institutions and norms that still remained available to us have effectively been dismantled. It becomes necessary to create norms and institutions anew. This is not just the case for the USA, importantly, but for the great majority of us around the globe, including here in Australia. While we have the outward appearance of a strong democracy, with highly effective electoral systems, the capacity of citizens to effectively participate in decisions that affect our lives has been stripped from us, and, consequently, our trust in government has eroded. It is time we acknowledged the fact that the superficial signs of democracy that remain are distracting us from what Hannah Arendt called "the curious and sometimes even weird longevity of obsolete bodies politic."

In this context, presenting strikes as resistance in the last resort is ineffective. Flipping the frame into strikes as direct action which is bringing communities together to create new democratic institutions from the grassroots up, however, is incredibly powerful.

In On Revolution, Arendt sets out a brilliant historical analysis of why the American Revolution created a lasting set of institutions, while the French and Russian Revolutions (among others) led to ongoing violence, coercion, and instability. For her, it is largely due to the prior

existence of deep experience of grassroots democracy, in town meetings and new commonwealths. For Arendt, true power comes from communities "acting in concert." Without this experience, liberation from oppression cannot also involve the action of freedom, and simply leads to more oppression.

I fear that we may be heading swiftly towards the Barbarization scenario. If we are to turn that around, in a Great Transition, cultivating new grounds of collective power that can form the basis of new collective institutions is crucial and urgent.

David Graeber beautifully defined direct action as acting as though we were already free. This is an exciting path, at a moment when our freedom through existing superficially democratic systems has become illusory. What if we used the momentum towards a general strike to be free together? To mobilize mutual aid to feed and support each other? To gather communities to generate and share energy? To communally grow and distribute food? To make decisions together through deliberation and confederal delegation?

In many ways, Minneapolis has shone a path. Others, often on the front lines of fossil fuel extraction, among and in solidarity with First Nations, are leading the way with occupations. Countless more and simply doing it with food and energy alternatives at the grassroots. This can be gathered together, not to defend a zombie system but to grow a new one.

This is why I believe we need to shift from "strike" to "occupation," from "stop" to "start," from "resistance" to "direct action."

About the Author

Tim Hollo is executive director of the Green Institute, where he focuses on eco-political philosophy, practice, and policy related to the rights of nature, universal basic income, and participatory democracy. He is a Visiting Fellow at the Sydney Environment Institute at the University of Sydney and author of *Living Democracy: An Ecological Manifesto for the End of the World as We know It*. As both environmentalist and musician, Tim founded Green Music Australia to reduce the environmental impact of the music sector and drive social and cultural change.

Bonn Juego

Reading Jeremy Brecher's essay "Society on Strike: A Last Defense Against Tyranny?," I found myself returning to an enduring question in North American political economy, first posed by the German historian Werner Sombart: *Whyis there no socialism in the United States?*[1] This classic 1906 inquiry has taken on a dark, unsettling new meaning in the mid-2020s. The Trump administration consolidates capitalist power not only by disciplining workers but by capturing segments of them, deploying divide-and-rule tactics across race, culture, gender, and immigration status to condition the working class to act not as a class-for-itself, but as a class-against-itself. Trumpian neoliberalism is now fully manifest—openly supporting the superrich, finance capital, fossil fuel industrialists, Big Tech, and corporate CEOs, while subordinating the National Labor Relations Board, stripping federal bargaining rights, and punitively policing migrant workers. In response, trade unionists and activists have increasingly called for a "social strike" or "general strike" as

the ultimate articulation of what Brecher, drawing on democratic struggles from Serbia to the Philippines, calls "people power." The impulse is right. But the strategy, as currently conceived, is not enough.

The proposal for a social strike remains theoretically and strategically insufficient as an emancipatory project at this historic juncture. "Make America Great Again" is, on its face, a nationalist slogan—but it functions as a rhetorical device working at a global, comparative, and historical scale, ideologically positioning the United States in relation to other nations and against a mythologized past of American supremacy. Its nationalism is the message; its globalism is the logic. A purely domestic labor strategy can only answer half the question. We must therefore meet MAGA on both fronts—pushing beyond the insular, nationalistic orientation of the US labor movement, dismantling the violent, nationalist capitalism that weaponizes US supra-state power against the Global South, and building the internationalist solidarity capable of confronting it.

Sombartian Residue: The Myth of Worker Contentment

Sombart famously observed that American socialism floundered on "shoals of roast beef and apple pie," suggesting that material prosperity and cultural conservatism together precluded class consciousness. In 2026, the roast beef is rotting, yet socialism remains elusive. The failure of a unified social strike stems from a darker mutation of Sombart's thesis: workers' discontent has not disappeared but has been captured by a right-wing populism organized around a personality cult, redirecting class grievance into racial and cultural warfare. The contemporary American worker is not content; they are deeply precarious, restless, insecure, and widely dispersed. As Erik Olin Wright demonstrated, class structure limits class formation, which in turn shapes the configuration of class struggle that can be pursued.[2] The fragmented nature of the modern economy—driven by the globalization of capitalist production, finance, and technology, including platform gig work, remote labor, and the erosion of the shop floor—has prevented the formation of a cohesive revolutionary agent.

Furthermore, the "psychological wage of whiteness" reactivated through MAGA's cultural nationalism has displaced Sombart's economic abundance as the dominant ideological barrier to cross-racial working-class solidarity.[3] Many workers, particularly in the industrial heartland, view the regime's figurehead as a protector against "globalist" elites, experiencing his consolidation of power not as authoritarian overreach but as long-overdue vindication. This creates a crippling rift in class formation. When a substantial portion of the working class interprets executive encroachment not as an attack on their interests but as an instrument of their cultural restoration, the social strike becomes a partisan tactic rather than a universal expression of people power. The problem is not simply that these workers are deceived by disinformation from the right, nor that they suffer from false consciousness; it is that the left has yet to offer a narrative of solidarity compelling enough to compete.

Polanyian Contradiction: Protection as Tyranny

Brecher rightly identifies widespread harm, weakened institutions, and the failure of official opposition as the conditions that have made a general strike newly thinkable. But objective conditions for social change can equally serve a counterrevolutionary interregnum. Karl Polanyi's concept of the "double movement" explains why. Polanyi warned that a self-regulating market

"could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society."[4] As the MAGA-led state pushes market fundamentalism and imperialist expansion to their limits, society has, as Polanyi predicted, moved to protect itself. But this counter-movement is neither inherently democratic nor liberatory.

The double movement, as Kari Polanyi Levitt clarifies, is not a self-correcting mechanism moderating the excesses of market fundamentalism. It is an "existential contradiction" between capital's requirements for unlimited accumulation and people's need to live in mutually supportive relations.[5] Polanyi himself recognized the trap: the very measures society takes to protect itself impair the market's self-regulation, further disorganizing social life and generating new dangers in turn. The MAGA-led state is the concrete political embodiment of this antagonism. Presenting emergency powers as a necessary shield for national security and against the devastation wrought by decades of economic liberalization, the regime converts the legitimate language of societal protection into an instrument of authoritarianism. In doing so, it only deepens the contradiction. Protection becomes the justification for tyranny.

Methodological Nationalism and The Global South

Viewed from the Global South, both Sombart's analysis of capitalism and Brecher's proposed strategy for a social strike fall into the same conceptual blind spot—methodological nationalism. When unions support Trump's "America First" tariffs or green protectionism, they operate under the illusion of a national capitalist interest, treating the US economy as a bounded domestic system where American jobs can be protected through the state's executive power alone. US economic interest, however, is sustained through a global supra-state apparatus—notably its military-industrial complex and the exorbitant privilege of its monetary sovereignty. US progressives are called to expand their analytical horizon beyond national borders, resisting a subliminal nationalism —the unconscious acceptance of the nation-state as the natural limit of political imagination—that obfuscates the coercive dynamics of American imperial power.

In the era of Trump's transactional imperialism and its expansionist wars, surplus is expropriated across the world-system not simply through the exploitation of workers' productivity, but through the destruction of nature and the expenditure of human lives, converting valuable beings into

disposable inputs for accumulation.[6] Thus, the "American worker" is no longer just a national subject but a node in a global chain of exploitation. By focusing on the national "roast beef" without a geopolitical frame, even US progressive politics risks demanding a larger share of the "pie" baked with the labor, land, and resources of a systematically subjugated Global South.

A social strike that aims merely to restore the liberal status quo forgets that this normalcy was the very spawning ground of the current crisis. The US presidency commands a vast military and financial apparatus deployed routinely to encroach on the territory and policy space of the Global South. A strike that seeks to "save democracy" without interrogating the imperial character of that democracy remains parochial—a "low-intensity democracy," bravely opposing the abuses of the White House on its citizens and immigrants within its own borders but hardly challenging the excesses of the US empire abroad.

Supply Chain Internationalism

To extend the horizon of Brecher's strategic vision, the global movement towards a great transition should explore "supply chain internationalism." As Kim Moody, a proponent of social movement unionism, has noted, contemporary developments in logistics have created a lean, tightly integrated international production web that is more vulnerable than at any previous moment in capitalist history.[7] A national social strike can shut down a city, but a supply chain strike can disrupt the empire's value circuit.

The viability of striking back internationally would greatly depend on US labor shedding its insular orientation and recognizing that the Global South can be a vanguard of worldwide solidarity. From the historical "Bandung Spirit" of non-alignment across Asia and Africa and the declaration of the "Zone of Peace" across Latin America and the Caribbean, to the "Territories of Life" defended by Indigenous peoples and peasant communities all over the world, the Global South—understood not as a geographic category reducible to particular nation-states but as a political formation forged through shared experiences of colonialism and imperial extraction—carries a long, living tradition of resistance to imperialism.[8] The social strike must be reframed as an anti-imperialist defensive necessity. When American trade unions coordinate with Global South socio-ecological movements, they move from a parochial protest to a transnational siege.

To practically implement supply chain internationalism, among other ways, progressive forces need (1) to map imperial chokepoints by coordinating strikes at nodes where US imperial interests intersect with Global South labor; (2) to engage in cross-border pattern bargaining by demanding identical safety and wage standards for subsidiaries in the Global South to strip the empire of the ability to exploit spatial inequality for competitive advantage; and (3) to establish a Global South veto on coercion by refusing to facilitate the shipment of arms to conflict zones or the enforcement of unilateral imperialist sanctions—which should likewise be empowering for a collective of workers in the imperial core to countervail their own government's war of aggression.

Winning Democracy Against Fascism

Sombart was right that there was no socialism in the United States—but for the wrong reasons. The national scale of his analysis obscured the reality of capitalist class relations and the imperial imperatives of capital accumulation and global hegemony. Today, Brecher's social strike will fail if it remains a nationalist defense of a hollowed-out liberal democracy. As I have argued elsewhere, authoritarian populism emerges not from nowhere but from the failures of neoliberalism and the shortcomings and hypocrisies of the liberal democratic order that preceded it.[9]

The broader movement of which the social strike is a part must also win in the electoral arena—on a platform against austerity, oligarchy, inequality, injustice, and militarism. Succeeding not only in winning elections but, critically, in governing is essential, lest disillusionment drives voters once again toward liberal elites or the authoritarian right. The Weimar Republic remains the standing historical warning that democracy can breed fascism. The urgent lesson of the MAGA moment is that fascist movements cannot be permitted to capture the nuclear, military, technological, and financial apparatuses of the supra-state. Everywhere and without exception, fascists and megalomaniacs should be denied possession of state power.

The US empire is striking back militarily and financially, an aggressive response to its declining economic, technological, cultural, and ideological hegemony.[10] Trump's regime is to be opposed and held accountable, and labor leaders who lend legitimacy to its nationalist cover should be called to task. A post-Trump politics must build a democracy that serves no empire and answers to no hegemon. A society on strike is indeed a needed response to tyranny. But if the social strike is to

be a last defense against tyranny in the United States, it must also become the first act of solidarity with the Global South—in resisting all imperialism and in dismantling the structures of domination that empire, in any form, imposes on the peoples of the world.

Endnotes

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Bonn Juego is Senior Lecturer in International Development Studies at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, and Chair of the Finnish Society for Development Research. He writes across academic, policy, and public spheres on the political economy of development, geopolitics, and ecological and technological change under capitalism, with particular attention to Global South issues, specifically Southeast Asia and North-South relations. His work also engages heterodox development economics, labor and social movement studies, and alternative futures. Previously, he worked in the Philippine government, research-based advocacy think tanks, and global civil society organizations. He holds a PhD in Development and International Relations from Aalborg University, Denmark.

Ben Manski

"It is difficult to envision concretely what social strikes would mean in the context of the struggle against Trumpian autocracy," writes Jeremy Brecher in his essay, "Society on Strike: A Last Defense Against Tyranny?"

Is it?

It is a truism that mass uprisings and their trajectories are unpredictable, their outcomes unknowable. But like many supposed truisms, on examination, this one often proves false. The forms and timing of uprisings are much more predictable than we sometimes tell ourselves. As I attempt to show using a method I call "Movement Building Analysis," it turns out that there is a great deal that activists know about the movements they build and the history they make.[1] That activist knowledge has predictive power.

The social movement of these past six decades has been to the mountaintop. It has seen something of the promised land. And it has strategies, tactics, and resources for getting there. The U.S. protest waves of 1999–2001, 2011–2013, and 2020 were not only predictable; they were made by the people who predicted them. If we pay close enough attention to the origins and trajectories of the action on the ground, so too may we predict the form and timing of what comes next.

Let's begin with U.S. cities. This past October, *Common Dreams* published my short, dense, article "This is Not a Drill: Bravery as Strategy in the Face of American Tragedy," in which I wrote that:

> Today we face the unthinkable. But the resilience and resistance of American cities show that another world is possible. At the moment, our cities are where the current crisis is being determined and where the possibility of a better world is being built . . . . [They] are

the places both most targeted by Trump and they are where he has met his most determined resistance."[2]

I wrote that in the wake of federal invasions of DC and Los Angeles, and at the launch of ICE's so-called "Operation Midway Blitz." In the weeks and months that followed, ICE attempted to occupy Chicago and Minnesota's Twin Cities.

The response from these and other U.S. cities tells us plenty about "what a social strike would mean" in the current context. Hundreds of thousands of people in Chicago, Minneapolis, and St. Paul organized themselves into nonviolent neighborhood, workplace, union, faith, and civil resistance groups. They trained. They organized. And they acted with great discipline and bravery in confronting Trump's gestapo-in-training.

First Prediction: Organized cities will lead the coming social strike.

In the same "Bravery as Strategy" article, I argued that the scale and regularity of mass protests needed to increase.

Since then, we have seen increasing coordination of the three major coalitions of the center (No Kings), center-left (Rising Majority), and left (May Day Strong), and the largest single days of protest in U.S. history.

Yes, we all still live with the unreality of trying to get through our days pretending that, as the rising musical artist Carsie Blanton writes, "Everything is Great!"

Yet it is significant that we also find ourselves in a period of momentum—from the March 28 No Kings protests, heading toward the May 1 No Billionaires protests—with further major rounds of protest already planned for the summer and fall.

Second Prediction: This broad-spectrum coalition-of-coalitions will hold and produce ongoing protests by Americans in the tens of millions.

This self-described anti-antifascist regime wields the most terrifying technologies of surveillance and violence ever available. It has used these to murder Americans off the coasts of Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela, and it has murdered Americans in the streets of California, Illinois, Maryland, Texas, and Virginia. It has purged officers and public servants who balked at unlawful orders. It has murdered Americans in its concentration camps at the borders and across the Americas, and it is building more camps. It has built ICE into a $75 billion ideological police force and prepared the way for the use of ICE, Secret Service, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), and other federal forces, including our regular armed forces, at transportation hubs, schools, places of worship, and places of government, and yes, places of voting. And it has taken the final step in the long march of the executive into the exclusive war powers domains of Congress and the People; it makes unsanctioned and unchecked war on Gaza, war on Iran, war on Venezuela, and more war on Iran.

Third Prediction: The regime will deploy significant violence in an attempt to disrupt the midterm election tidal wave that is coming.

These three predictions do not speak to everything we need to know. Of course they don't. But the questions that Brecher raised must be confronted seriously.

Some contributors to this discussion, looking from afar in horror at what is happening here, understandably but mistakenly view the U.S. as a totality. That is how most people experience other countries, particularly countries whose governments brutalize so much of the rest of the world. But the U.S. is an enormous, plural, and highly contentious society. It is not a totality.

As recent polls have repeatedly shown, Trump is opposed by a supermajority. This means that an informed international solidarity with the struggle within the United States is both possible and necessary.

This brings me to what William I. Robinson wrote about the repressive apparatus directed against society:

> Within the United States, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is emerging as a fascist paramilitary force: a modern iteration of the brownshirts that serve as a bridge between the development of the fascist state and a fascist reorganization of civil society.

This is a truth we all must face. Are we facing it? Truly?

Gwendolyn Hallsmith, writes that, "we're naïve to imagine that effective resistance won't be met with increasing violence, increasing incarceration, and increasing tyranny," pointing to the (generally unacknowledged) history of mass strikes and general strikes in the United States, and to the horrific violence used against labor and popular movements by paramilitary, police, and military forces.

Given that history, is it so hard to predict what forms the social strike might take? We may be a long way down history's trail from the formation of the world's first socialist parties in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, New York, and Boston, and from the century of struggle and repression that followed them, but we have more recent history to point to.

As Guy Standing argues, education is an "existential flashpoint." It is also a workplace. Alongside the May Day strikes of immigrant workers, the municipal and statewide teachers and anti-austerity strikes of Wisconsin (2011), Chicago (2012, 2016, 2019), West Virginia (2018), Oklahoma (2018), Los Angeles (2019), Seattle (2022), Minneapolis (2022), and Portland (2023), tell us something about what a coming social strike might look like. Yes, there is a certain pattern to those cities (and cities like Boston and Philadelphia where citywide strikes were averted after management conceded): Educators and service workers have been leading the municipal resistance against ICE.

Where does this leave us?

1. Organized cities will lead the coming social strike. Public sector unions, service workers unions and organizations, and community and neighborhood organizations will be particularly important to this leadership.

2. A broad-spectrum coalition of coalitions will produce ongoing protests by Americans in the tens of millions and in every corner of the country.

3. The regime will deploy significant violence in an attempt to disrupt the midterm election tidal wave that is coming. Many are in denial about the severity of this coming violence, and most of us (likely nearly all of us) are as of yet unprepared for it.

Yes, it is possible that the regime could disintegrate before or as things get worse. Some Republican officials are behaving as if the midterm elections will happen and will produce a Democratic wave, and they are responding by seeking an early exit. Some members of the radical center (as small as it is, it does exist, and in this case it may matter) clearly understand that this regime is an openly fascist regime, and that as such it poses not only an existential threat to democracy, but also to liberalism. But in reviewing the accumulated responses on this question of the social strike, one thing seems consistent: None of us are so foolish as to count on the possibility of regime implosion.

Instead, we must ready ourselves for a period of struggle that is likely to intensify through Election Day in November and for many more months following. Even if voting takes place and vote counting is allowed to be completed by the duly constituted election authorities, it is by no means assured that the newly elected Congress will be able to take office, as I wrote in "Bravery as Strategy."

Allow me, therefore, to draw a line under **Prediction Four: Come 2027, we may very well be faced with competing claimants to national power, and an intensifying struggle that operates far beyond the established norms of U.S. politics.**

This brings me to something else that William I. Robinson points out:

> Lastly, let us recall that at times of crisis history seems to accelerate, contradictions ripen, and what seemed most unlikely, even impossible, may appear on the horizon of the possible. The situation in the United States and globally is very fluid and could go in many different directions.

And to something that Biljana Vankovska and others insist:

> Too often, your theories and methods serve to preserve the social and class status quo, rather than imagining new possibilities that genuinely serve global society.

I agree. It would be profoundly unethical of any of us to fail to prepare for all the possibilities of this moment, both terrifying and liberating.

I believe that the liberating possibilities are already here and already bound up in the resistance—in the society that is, increasingly, already on strike, already building a better next system.

My day-to-day work as a professor involves research, teaching, and collaboration with local neighbors, international citizens, students, and colleagues, about and for an emerging next world system organized through community power, popular constitutionalism, solidarity economies, transformative justice, digital commoning, and other approaches to creating a world that is democratic, sustainable, and just.

Recognizing the relationship between the immediate existential crisis faced by people within the United States under a fascist regime, and the near-term existential world crisis generated by climate system collapse, digitalization, and necropolitics (rendering the vast majority as disposable), the necessity of world system change, and desirability of winning a better next system—this is what occupies me. One major part of this particular work is the Next System Teach-Ins, which I encourage you to investigate and perhaps co-organize: NextSystem.org.

I firmly believe that each of us has a duty to confront the actuality that much of the United States is already heading into the depths of what Brecher has called a social strike. We do in fact know a great deal both about the conditions of struggle and the conditions of possibility present in this strike. We cannot yet predict the outcome. We must not look away.

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About the Author

Ben Manski is Assistant Professor of Sociology and Director of Next System Studies at George Mason University, where he directs Next System Studies. Prior to his academic career, he practiced public interest law and managed national non-profit organizations, direct action campaigns, and political campaigns and parties. Manski founded, co-founded, or helped instigate many pro-democracy mobilizations and organizations, including the Democracy Teach-Ins, 180/Movement for Democracy and Education, Liberty Tree Foundation, Move to Amend, Wisconsin Wave, and the Global Climate Strikes. He holds a PhD in sociology from the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Francine Mestrum

Although I can't say much about the specific situation in the United States, I would like to put forward a few ideas about what social movements can and cannot do.

In theory, a "social strike" is perfectly possible, and I think it can also be a good and effective form of resistance.

How to organize such a thing is, admittedly, another question.

Is organization really necessary? Isn't it conceivable that a spontaneous outburst of anger might occur after a government takes a measure perceived as unjust? Think of what James C. Scott described at the time with his "hidden transcripts" in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. Resistance can be prepared, in silence, without being explicitly expressed, until suddenly a moment comes when everyone realizes: now! I think this is certainly possible, though perhaps mainly on a local scale.

To oust a national government, organization is probably needed: agreements, division of tasks, a timetable, and so on. Around which themes? They must be issues that appeal to everyone; otherwise, it will never succeed. There are plenty of such themes: democracy, human rights, poverty… and war. Yet hasn't the indifference and sense of powerlessness in our societies grown so great that people find it hard to get off their sofas? There is a great deal of outrage today about the genocide in Gaza, the bombing of a girls' school in Iran, the invasion of Ukraine… but isn't the first concern where the nearest cheap petrol station is? Where can I still find affordable petrol for my car?

The state of the world today is so harrowing, and there is so much tragedy. In the Middle East, children are being shot down as if it were a game. In the West, we switch off, because who can bear so much suffering? And what could "I" possibly do about it?

Time and again, I am amazed by the many solidarity actions taking place around Gaza, Cuba, Ukraine, and Iran, but I have to conclude time and again that all these actions do not set anything in motion on a broader scale. Moreover, we know we are hurtling towards a climate disaster. So what?

And yes, the repression will be harsh. How long can such a social strike be sustained?

And yet the main question hasn't even been asked!

Suppose a broad social strike could bring down a government. What then? Who or what would take its place?

What happened with the Arab Spring in Tunisia? In Egypt? What happened in Iran in 1979? How did the ayatollahs come to power? Was that the intention?

Think about how the Gen Z movement is being used and abused today by political forces that couldn't care less about democracy or human rights.

Or, to put it another way, however unlikely a social strike may be, it is undoubtedly the easiest part of the whole exercise. Anyone who genuinely wants to work towards regime change needs an organization, a strategy, and tactics. And that is where the shoe really pinches. What, indeed, do they want to achieve?

Over the past few decades, I have been active in a number of global, European, and national social movements, from Charta 91 to Attac Europe, the World Social Forum, and the Asia-Europe People's Forum. Time and again, we have come up against either political unwillingness or sectarianism. All these movements consist of excellent people, ideologically committed—perhaps too committed—and time and again the movements come to nothing, because there is too little willingness to compromise, because people have too little understanding of what the rest of the world looks like, because they are afraid of becoming "political."

Today, there are wonderful campaigns for Gaza and international solidarity with Cuba. That is incredibly positive, but will it bring about any real change, apart from for the individual people taking part who can sleep with a clear conscience?

At the end of March, the first international antifa conference took place in Porto Alegre—a highly commendable initiative. Organized by one "small" left-wing movement, with protests and squabbles from the other "small" left-wing movements. Will we never learn? Will any real work actually be done on a strategy? Or will it all amount to nothing more than three days of anti-imperialist slogans?

I realize I come across as very pessimistic. Yet I am not pessimistic—quite the opposite. I will continue to participate in actions and initiatives that I believe can lead to a better world until my dying day. But how should that be done? I do not know.

Certainly not in the way that has been followed so far. Among all the do-gooders, there is too little willingness to truly work together with others, to listen to other do-gooders who hold a different view, to reflect on what, despite everything, we still have in common, to question themselves. The "old left" has no solutions.

On my most pessimistic days, I sometimes think nothing will change until a disaster strikes, a nuclear bomb falls, or the climate is truly ruined. Only then will people believe that they must sit down together, that they must talk, that they need solutions. That is what happened after World War II. The agreements made back then were certainly not perfect, but they were good; they brought nearly a century of peace to large parts of the world. So it is possible.

My answer to the question is therefore: yes, it is possible, a social strike, but don't ask me how. Perhaps completely unexpected, spontaneous, and forceful. And will it lead to real change? I don't know.

About the Author

Francine Mestrum is chair of Global Social Justice, an association for transformative universal social protection and the common good. With a special focus on the social commons, her research concerns social dimensions of globalization, poverty, inequality, social protection, public services, and gender. She is a member of the International Council of the World Social Forum and of the International Organizing Committee of the Asia Europe People's Forum. Her most recent book is *The Social Commons: Rethinking Social Justice in Post-Neoliberal Societies*.

Valentine M. Moghadam

As I sit to write this contribution on March 28, 2026, I have just returned from the No Kings Day protest in Boston. Today's protest was the third, and most likely the most politically diverse, hence the many *No War*, *Stop the Genocide in Gaza*, and *Hands off Iran* signs that I saw. I was there as part of two groups—Massachusetts Peace Action (MAPA) and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)—and was impressed that what had started as a Democratic Party–supporting anti-Trump initiative had broadened to encompass many left-wing groups in the US, with grievances and aspirations far beyond No King Trump. I am sure that a similarly broad coalition was in evidence in many other US cities. The Boston protest was so large that I could not see all the placards. Was labor represented? Black Lives Matter? I would hope so (MAPA does include labor activists).

It is precisely such a broad coalition that could undertake the historic task before us in the United States, as Jeremy Brecher has argued, and beyond. I am sure that Iran's people—suffering under the illegal, unprovoked, and asymmetrical war of aggression launched by the US and Israeli regimes—have been at least somewhat heartened to learn of the solidarity that was in evidence today (assuming they were able to receive the information).

Trump's approval rating, according to recent polls, is quite low, with nearly 57% of Americans opposed to him. Those were the Americans who came out *en masse* for No Kings Day earlier today.

But what can be done to turn this into a sustained movement for fundamental change—to end America's obscene levels of income inequality and its destructive foreign policy, to respect international institutions such as the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice and their rulings on Israel's genocidal war on Gaza, to stop the environmental degradation

that has made life nearly impossible for so many across the globe while further enriching oligarchs and their government enablers?

Successful transformations—at least since the early twentieth century—have come about through organizational leadership, cross-class alliance, coherent ideology, and deliberate strategy and tactics. In its absence, I can only raise questions. Could the US even form a broad social strike centered on delivering dignity, recognition, and resources to the people that sociologist Arlie Hochschild has written about so eloquently?[1] Could tax resistance by middle-income citizens be organized, to force a heavier tax burden on the oligarchs and to compel the government to shift its priorities from military spending to public investments? Could professors and students launch strikes to call for a certain levelling of compensation packages and slashing of tuition costs? Could boycotts be organized of those companies, services, and other institutions owned by private equity firms? Could Americans be persuaded to stop voting in what is essentially a rigged two-party capitalist enterprise with institutionalized corruption? Finally, could citizens of those European states aligned with US foreign policy force their governments to change course and end the world's appalling wars? Or must we wait until another world war transforms international relations and provides opportunities for new class relations and societal arrangements?

Given all the depressing examples of attacks and assaults—physical and juridical alike—on protesters and working people across US history, it may very well be that change will come about largely through external pressures intensified by the global order's deepening polycrisis. One can only hope that change comes sooner rather than latter, and more nonviolently than otherwise.

Endnote

1. See, e.g., Arlie Hochschild, *Stolen Pride: Loss, Shame, and the Rise of the Right* (New York: New Press, 2024).

About the Author

Valentine M. Moghadam is Professor of Sociology and International Affairs at Northeastern University, where she researches globalization; transnational social movements and networks; economic citizenship; and gender, development, and women's movements in the Middle East and North Africa. Her books include *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, the award-winning *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks*, and *Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement*. She holds a PhD in sociology from American University.

Ronaldo Munck

Jeremy Brecher's essay is a most welcome contribution, highlighting the potential role of mass action in relation to "what is to be done" about Trump, nicely complementing an analysis recently published by *New Left Review*.[1] There is now a growing literature from labor scholars demonstrating the role of popular mobilization and novel forms of worker organization.[2] I have, for myself, long advocated for a "social movement unionism" that goes beyond the limitations of economic and political unionism.[3] We have seen effective mass strike movement in Poland (1980–1989), Brazil (1984–1985), the Philippines (1986), Serbia (2000), Sudan (2018–2019), and Iceland (1975–2023), where the "women's day off" is perhaps the best example of the social strike. I would argue that today it is the question of migration that is at the fore of many political debates (think Trump, Nigel Farage, Viktor Orbán, José Antonio Kast, etc.) and where labor faces critical issues.

Trade unions have always played a role in the struggle to defend or regain democracy under authoritarian regimes. A prominent exception has been Nazi Germany, where it is often assumed that the working class and its trade unions were simply annihilated as an organized force. Undoubtedly, a militant working class and a tradition of activism were brutally quashed. However, Tim Mason, among others, has shown that this did not necessarily lead to apathy and quietism.[4] While it could not be considered an organized democratic resistance, there was a form of opposition, and it did set limits to the Nazis' objectives. The residual traditions of practical solidarity and the labor rights acquired in the 1920s were not simply obliterated. Mason's assertion that the German working class refused to acquiesce to Nazism, totalitarianism, and the obliteration of democracy is important. The memory of hard-won rights and collective mobilization prior to 1933 had a lingering influence in everyday life. What is the situation in the 2030s going to be?

My reaction to reading Brecher's piece is thus to welcome it, of course, as part of the fight against authoritarianism while I would also wish to go a bit deeper into the question of why so many working-class people remain committed to Trump. [5]

Arlie Hochschild's work has contributed the metaphor of the "line" to explain this phenomenon. You are standing in a long line for the "American Dream." You've worked hard, but the line isn't moving. Suddenly, you see "line-cutters" (immigrants, minorities, refugees) being ushered to the front by a "liberal elite" (the government). Likewise, when a leader calls the system "rigged," he isn't just stating a fact; he is witnessing their pain. To the person in line, the "lie" feels like a deeper emotional truth than any economic statistic we could provide.

So, while Trump is constantly fact-checked by the establishment media, these aren't (just) lies—they are shelters from shame. From being called a "redneck," "uneducated," or "deplorable" by the cultural elite, which creates an intense psychological wound. The populist leader doesn't just provide "facts"; he provides liberation from shame. He "shames the shamers."

The missing dimension to understand this is that of "populism," which I do not deploy in a liberal pejorative sense but rather in the Latin American tradition. I see it not as the degradation of democracy but rather as creating the "logic of difference" whereby the divide between "people" and "oligarchy" becomes the dominant fault line in society.[6] What happened in Argentina in 2023 was that the labor-oriented Peronist hegemony since the collapse of the capitalist order in 20001 was disrupted by Milei and his "chainsaw politics."[7] The Central General de Trabajadores, the powerful Peronist union, organized several general strikes in 2024 and 2025 which were in many ways examples of successful social strikes. However, Milei argued persuasively that this was the *Casta*, the system, the oligarchy which had failed the masses for many years (and he was not wrong about such failure) once again trampling on ordinary folk.

Jeremy Brecher's strategy of the "social strike" rests on the humanist assumption that society is a cohesive totality held together by our collective participation. However, following Timothy Appleton's Lacanian critique of populism, we must recognize that for the contemporary Right—exemplified by Javier Milei's "chainsaw politics"—society does not exist.[8] Brecher assumes that a withdrawal of cooperation will collapse the regime by starving it of social legitimacy. But as we see with Milei, the right-wing populist pull is precisely the evisceration of the social fabric, not its

preservation. Supporters of Milei or Trump do not want to "fix" the social contract; they find a singular jouissance in the leader's performance of its destruction. By treating Trumpism as a mere failure of "truth," Brecher ignores the unconscious pull of the "populism of singularities" (based on unique, "singular" cultural identities—rather than universal standards), where the leader's transgressive rupture of social norms is the very thing that binds the movement together. You cannot "strike" against a movement that is already fueled by the thrill of social collapse by invoking universal (liberal) values.

When Karl Polanyi wrote *The Great Transformation* in 1944, the "counter-movement" was a largely unified surge of society protecting itself against the "satanic mills" of the self-regulating market.[9] In that era, the "social strike" was the ultimate tool of Institutional Protection: a way for the organized working class to demand that the state re-embed the economy in social rights and collective safety. Fast forward to 2026, and Brecher's model encounters a society where the "counter-movement" has fractured into a civil war. For the millions of workers in the US, Argentina, and Europe who have seen their status and wages stagnate for thirty years, the institutions of the old protection—the unions, the NGOs, and the liberal state—no longer feel like shields. Instead, they are seen as the *Casta* (to use Milei's term) or the Globalist Elite. In this new landscape, social protection has been re-imagined as Identity Protection. This is not a movement for "governance," but one for Recognition. It is a story of pride and revenge that views Brecher's social strike not as a rescue mission, but as a desperate attempt by a failing establishment to maintain its own privileges.

We could extend Polanyi's frame as Nancy Fraser does and think in terms of a Triple Movement of Marketization, Social Protection, and Emancipation.[10] I think Brecher often confuses "Protection" with "Emancipation." Populists, on the other hand, argue that "Social Protection" has become a "straitjacket" that only benefits the "not-listening" elite. For a worker whose wages have been flat for thirty years, the "Unions" and "Government" aren't the solution to market chaos—they are the administrators of it. Milei's genius was framing the social strikers as the "disembedders" of the common man's freedom. We could, on the other hand, argue that when people can't re-embed

themselves economically (via wages), they seek to do it culturally. Trump and Milei offer them a "social fabric" made up of pride and revenge.

To achieve a true Great Transformation in the twenty-first century, we must move beyond the mechanical stoppage of gears, very much a twentieth-century strategy. We must build a counter-movement that offers more than just the redistribution of wages; we must seek a redistribution of dignity. Until we bridge the "Empathy Wall'" within the social counter-movement and offer a story where "the people" are actually heard, the social strike will remain a dubious weapon given the civil war now raging in the counter-movement.

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About the Author

Ronaldo Munck is Head of Civic Engagement at Dublin City University, where his role includes engaging the university's teaching and research with the needs of the community. He is also a Visiting Professor of International Development at the University of Liverpool and the University of Buenos Aires. He has written widely on his native Latin America, most recently *Rethinking Latin America*, and, as an active trade unionist as well as scholar, on the impact of globalization on labor. His current project focuses on the prospects for the new social movements in Latin America.

William I. Robinson

Jeremy Brecher's call for a social strike is welcomed and timely. I support the call, and I thank him. Here I want to raise some concerns and place the discussion in the context of the historic conjuncture we face, focusing principally on the United States in the interests of brevity. Behind the shocking headlines shaking the world is the epochal crisis of global capitalism. It may be true, as Brecher says, that the MAGA offensive is an "assault on society," but we need to be clear and specific on the nature of that assault and what has brought it about. Sustained resistance, including a mass strike if that can be pulled off, may be able to push back the fascist onslaught and restore momentarily the "democratic" status quo prior to Trumpism. But the problem cannot be reduced to the Trump regime, which is but a morbid symptom of a global capitalist system mired in unprecedented crisis.

If we don't understand the nature of Trumpism and what brought it to power, we are going, at best, to be running in place. Unprecedented global social polarization and the extreme concentration of wealth on a world scale in the hands of the transnational capitalist class (TCC) over the past half century of capitalist globalization and neoliberalism has led to an economic totalitarianism that is now translating into a political totalitarianism of a new type. Trumpism in the United States constitutes an embryonic fascist state that is developing new alliances with repressive states around the world as the transnational elite continues to fracture.

Behind Trumpism is Project 2025, which sets out to culminate the neoliberal counterrevolution that the ruling classes have been waging now for nearly half a century. It calls for the liberation of capital from all constraints, including total deregulation and privatization, smashing what remains of the welfare state, compressing wages, attacking unions, reducing taxes on capital and the rich, disorganizing the working class through racism and xenophobia, and a radical restructuring of the capitalist state towards authoritarian and neofascist forms, including a vast expansion of the powers of the presidency and of the state apparatus of repression and surveillance. The Trump regime has been faithfully implementing Project 2025 come hell or high water.

But who is behind Project 2025? Here we find the most violent and reactionary faction within the TCC. As I showed in a recent article in *The Philosophical Salon*, there is a new hegemonic complex of transnational capital that brings together the giant tech corporations with transnational finance capital and the military-industrial-repression complex: a fusion of Silicon Valley, the Pentagon, and Wall Street. Increasingly dependent on state contracts, subsidies, deregulation, and other state policies that establish the conditions for tech, financial, and military expansion, the hegemonic complex of capital is coming to embrace the embryonic fascist state in its Trumpist form. A classic sign of fascism is precisely the fusion of the leading fractions of capital with repressive and reactionary political power in the state, legitimated by a millenarian discourse, hyper-nationalism, racism, xenophobia, militarism, and extreme masculinization, alongside a fascist mobilization in civil society.

Within the United States, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is emerging as a fascist paramilitary force: a modern iteration of the Brownshirts that serve as a bridge between the development of the fascist state and a fascist reorganization of civil society. ICE aggression, beyond an assault on immigrant workers, is aimed at normalizing paramilitary terror. But crucial to note is that the war on immigrants, as well as the false "war on drugs," is an AI war waged through the new digital technologies as Silicon Valley pivots towards war and repression, backed by transnational finance capital and fused with military-industrial-repression capital servicing the global police state.

This emergent capital power bloc is at the center of this worldwide maelstrom as global capitalism enters a deadly new phase. The tech billionaires, financial billionaires, and the lords of war are becoming global geopolitical actors. They are wielding their enormous structural power through Global Trumpism, developing new modalities of control over civil society and seeking alternative forms of legitimacy founded on instability and chaos that facilitates control over countries and resources as global capitalism spirals into deeper crisis. This is a political crisis of state legitimacy, capitalist hegemony, and geopolitical confrontation. But to understand Global Trumpism, we must identify the structural dimension at the center of the crisis: that of overaccumulation, chronic stagnation, and a declining rate of profit.

The structural crisis can only be overcome by violently cracking open new spaces for accumulation, by transferring the cost of the crisis to the working and popular classes through wage compression and austerity, and by aligning states and political systems worldwide with the agenda of the

new capital power bloc. Led by the new hegemonic capital complex, the TCC has unleashed a predatory round of digitally driven expansion around the world, pivoting towards more savage forms of extractivist accumulation as it seizes land, energy, and mineral resources to fuel the demands of AI technology and data centers. Global Trumpism is the instrument of the worldwide wave of violent capitalist expansion.

This is the big picture behind the global firestorm, from Venezuela to Iran, from Washington's Greenland grab to ICE terrorism in US cities. It may appear on the surface that Trump operates on the basis of his own whim and psychopathy, but that is an illusion. The new hegemonic capital complex now relies on the fascist state to smash open access to resources, control restive populations, and adopt the deregulatory and other policies necessary for expansion. Savage global inequalities can only be contained through violent containment and transnational systems of mass social control. Democracy is an obstacle to pushing forward the agenda of the power bloc. Trump and his cronies get to use the state as a machine for their personal accumulation through theft, fraud, bribery, and corruption. Diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder, Trump has his ego massaged by a layer of sycophants who also serve as intermediaries between capital and the regime.

This is for the larger backdrop to Brecher's call for a social strike. But Brecher seems to suggest that the challenge we face now is how to restore the pre-Trump status quo. If a mass strike were simply to restore the Democrats, where would that lead us? The Trump regime may have upped the ante, but the crisis and, in tandem with it, the fascist project have been percolating since the turn of the century. It is the Democratic Party that delivered us to Trumpism. It abandoned the multiethnic, multinational working class many years ago. Since the Clinton years, it has been a party of neoliberalism, of Wall Street billionaires, of the military-industrial complex, and of war. Since 1948, it has been a party supporting Zionist settler colonialism, and it sponsored the first year of the genocide in Gaza.

The US working class has experienced an ongoing destabilization of its living conditions over this past half-century of capitalist globalization and neoliberalism. Trumpism is in large part the fascist response to this social and economic crisis of the working class and to the crisis of state legitimacy that this socioeconomic crisis produced. Trump managed to get elected a second time by putting forth a populist discourse that spoke to rising socioeconomic insecurity and mass social anxiety. He manipulated mass discontent with this populist, racist, nationalist, and neo-fascist discourse, with false promises to solve the socioeconomic problems of the masses. He turned immigrants into scapegoats and harvested the massive discontent with the Democrats and the establishment.

Brecher refers to the "leadership failure of the Democratic Party." What accounts for this failure? The mainstream of the party—which remains firmly in control despite progressive challenges such as those of New York City mayor Zohran Mamdani—represents the same billionaire corporate and financial oligarchy as do the Republicans, including the emerging capital power complex. It is now trying to walk a tightrope: how to oppose Trump without losing control to a mass mobilization from below? Democratic Party–aligned forces have been the driving force behind organizing No Kings Day protests (although note: insurgent grassroots forces are also mobilizing for these protests). Five million people, myself included, participated in the first No Kings protest, in June 2025. Seven million participated in the second, myself included, in October 2025. By the time this comment is posted we will have had a third No Kings protest (scheduled for March 28).

If the Democrats were really interested in bringing down Trumpism, why have they not attempted to organize rolling protests and to escalate resistance? The answer for me seems clear: the Democrats are more fearful of mass working-class mobilization than they are of Trumpism. Let us recall that twice, first in 2016 and then in 2020, the most popular Democratic presidential candidate in decades, Bernie Sanders, was on track to win the Party's nomination until the party machinery violated its own internal rules and managed to undercut his candidacy. That machinery prefers Trumpism to a radical anti-corporate, working-class insurgency from below.

What comes after forcing Trump out? We need a mass strike not just against Trumpism, but for a popular agenda against neoliberalism, against the power of the billionaire class and the capital complex, against war and genocide, and for measures to radically redistribute wealth downward, meet urgent social needs (health care, housing, etc.), and rebuild shattered communities. Brecher recognizes that the sacrifice associated with a mass uprising cannot be for one or another political party. I agree. He goes on to say it would be in defense of democracy, of a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." It is not clear to me when we have ever had such a government in the United States, much less why this should be the sole organizing demand for a mass strike, that we do not just end up handing power back to a different sector of the political elite.

As Brecher notes, we must draw on the full panoply of forms of struggle aimed at self-defense and as disrupting the system, such as strikes, boycotts, commercial shutdowns, blockades, occupations, and civil disobedience. But no such mobilization will come about without broad and sustained enough participation to assure that the end result is not simply to return to pre-Trump "normalcy" rather than to a program of radical redistributive reform. A call to simply "establish or reestablish democracy" will not win over enough of the working class to such an uprising. And moreover, reestablishing the type of pre-Trump "democracy" we had will only buy us time only to have us return to a Trumpism without Trump.

Beyond a small but significant core of diehard racists and nativists, the MAGA base is made up of working-class people who face the same social and economic destabilization as the rest of the working class. They are not our enemy and must be won over not to the Democratic Party but to a working-class movement from below, and not by abstractions but by putting forth working-class social and economic demands.

Trumpism is the US variant of the same phenomenon we have seen in Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere with the rise of a populist and neo-fascist far right as the social fabric collapses and as the post–WWII international order crumbles. The hardships generated by decades of capitalist globalization and transnational class warfare from above combined with the failures of the traditional left have made working classes susceptible to the message of right-wing populism and

neo-fascism. We cannot push back against the beast of global capitalism and its madmen without a global working-class project. Such projects emerge from the heat of struggle and must speak to the material reality of mass deprivation and insecurity, not through manipulation but by putting forth a viable alternative to the rule of capital through mafioso states and global gangsterism.

Lastly, let us recall that at times of crisis history seems to accelerate, contradictions ripen, and what seemed most unlikely, even impossible, may appear on the horizon of the possible. The situation in the United States and globally is very fluid and could go in many different directions. One need not be a Leninist to appreciate Lenin's observation that "there are decades when nothing happens and there are weeks when decades happen." We are very far from the overthrow of global capitalism. Right now, our most urgent concern must be to survive, to overthrow the Trump regime, and to prevent World War III. But we will not achieve these things without building up a correlation of social, political, and class forces more favorable to the working and popular classes and more able to challenge the power of capital. Social or mass strikes of the kind that Jeremy Brecher is calling for will be crucial to this effort.

About the Author

William I. Robinson is a Distinguished Professor of Sociology, Global and International Studies, and Latin American and Iberian Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara. His books include *The Global Police State*, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, *Latin America and Global Capitalism*, and *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention and Hegemony*. Previously, he was an investigative journalist in Central America and has lectured around the world on the global economy, international politics, and contemporary world affairs. He holds a PhD in sociology from the University of New Mexico.

Antonio Roman-Alcalá

First, I want to thank those who have weighed in. It has been fascinating reading.

However, I also want to note that many responses seemed to describe a reality quite unfamiliar to me as someone who lives in the USA. Some of this seemed to be a result of relying on reportage to understand political conditions where one does not live, which can often mislead. For instance, the notion that the Trump voting phenomenon is underpinned by economic immiseration is belied by exit polling showing Trump's voters (especially in 2016) to be on average more affluent.[1] And we must be able to distinguish masses of one-time voters with the MAGA diehards.

The idea that our charge as change-seekers is to understand and speak to the average Trump voter, as opposed to the majority of the population who either didn't vote or voted for the opposition (~60%), is one that has been drummed up by mainstream media since 2016.[2] To see people taking that bait and swallowing that line is disappointing, given that the communities most harmed by Trump et al.—working class people, especially migrants and folks of color—are not only more deserving of our thoughtfulness, sympathy, and support than active racists and xenophobes; they are also the communities most active time and again in directly confronting regimes of harm—Republican and Democratic alike!—just as called for by Jeremy Brecher's essay.

Moreover, we must remember that movements like Occupy or BLM did not fade due to a "lack of a vision," but rather due to the concerted efforts of political and economic elites to attack and undermine them. We all can make different post-hoc assessments, but we should at least consider material realities, should we not? Where thousands were arrested or tear gassed or beaten, where laws and riot police were marshalled to prevent protest and gathering, where media talking points were spread to undermine public support for these movements. Just as with the student uprisings for Palestine, to blame the students for the repression they faced does not simply exhibit a lack of solidarity, it generates false strategic insights. It is not enough to face down power, if

power can crack your skulls and paint you as "terrorists" or "antisemites," and too few come to your defense. We should start by defending, not disparaging, the "real movement which abolishes the present state of things."[3]

Rather than focus on Trump or his voters, a longer and wider informed vision of change must aim beyond elections, and beyond the United States itself, if we are to build another world. In this, we indeed do need to reckon with the problematic ideological-political condition of much of the US population. For instance, possibly the most disturbing aspect of the 2024 election was the rising numbers of Trump voters of color. If we recognize this as mostly a result of mass ignorance, capitalist conditioning to accept an imperialist world system, misinformation, and false hopes that Trump would solve issues both real (e.g., cost of living) and fake (e.g., migrants causing problems), we recognize the central task of movements is political education at a mass scale. The election of Zohran Mamdani showed how such individuals might vote for Trump out of vague beliefs that he would lower egg prices, but turned around and voted for a democratic socialist who they figured would do the same. Voters and their politics are not simple, but when they are put into this extremely stultifying system of liberal democracy and horse race/surface-level elections, the outcomes are rarely good. People need to be reached in other modes, through other politics.

I want to say, generally, "Yes to social strikes!" There are certainly negative and positive sides to such strikes, and organizing dynamics to consider in advocating them. They work sometimes and invite reaction and regression other times. Nothing is predictable or foretold. Also, the wide and diverse tactical repertoires of millions of people involved in social movements do not necessarily need

to be "new" to work; we don't know what will work! We need to be comfortable with that fact, not seek some pseudo-scientific certainty like "if 3.5% of people are doing nonviolent protest we will win!" (And for what it's worth, there are multiple problems with the widely cited work on civil resistance by Erica Chenoweth.)[4]

People directly confronting ICE in Minnesota, Los Angeles, and elsewhere have shown us: when we fight, we don't necessarily win, but we *prevent them from winning*, and we build political

commitment and knowledge, firsthand. Tactics also are innovated. The need for fightback is also true on the global stage: when countries stand up to Trump, he backs down. Iran is currently challenging the US empire more so than any social movement from the Global North has lately been able to. Yet there's nothing that says such social movements can't help that process along. Instead of being concerned with the certainty of strategy, if we are to confront imperialism and the dead end of the Capitalist Worldeater, it seems to me the important lesson is *to act*, and to act *directly*, and in *opposition*.[5]

Rather than reproduce pessimism and deny the impacts of previous movements, we might recognize how change is not linear and be heartened by the fact that empire is not endless or infallible.[6] Here in the belly of the beast, we have communities of people (particularly, Native Americans) who have been sustaining life and hope through constant apocalypse for generations. Some have held on to life-sustaining practices and values against all odds. And similar resilience to the horrors of capitalism and colonization are found the world over.

We need, therefore, to think beyond elections, and beyond "voters." Social movements beget electoral change, not the other way around. Sure, there can be synergies between "inside" and "outside" strategies. But it is apparent that if we are assessing needs, it is for a grassroots focus—for efforts at mass organizing, not electoral strategizing. We need to learn from what organizers already do. For that, we might look to the Black-led Cooperation Jackson movement's model of "Build and Fight": not ignoring electoral politics, but treating them as tertiary at best.[7]

And this brings me to a perhaps unpopular point: liberal democracy doesn't need defending; it needs to be part of what we fight to replace, in any social strike. Marx was right about this long ago! Participatory democracy, grassroots and non-authoritarian socialisms, true decolonization (that is, anti-colonialism and land back), cosmologies that put humans back on equal footing with nonhuman nature—we have various "north stars" that point to a politics beyond capital, the state, domination, supremacism, or votes for "representatives." If there is a "missing vision," I would say these are a part of it. Such dreams of liberation are not utopian: they are essential building blocks for momentum against the toxic order (as I argue in my forthcoming book based on my twenty-plus years in BIPOC-led food movements in the USA).[8]

When we pay attention to our most marginalized sectors of society (in the USA), and look abroad, we see a pattern where food and farming, and the building of material and political autonomy from systems of harm, are fundamental aspects of liberation movements. Elections, not so much, even if these are helpful at times (e.g., Gustavo Petro in Colombia has been advancing admirable land reforms to support this autonomy). And social strikes, to the extent they are utilized, succeed and fail to some degree dependent on the extent of power built from the ground up: the material ability to disrupt the status quo, but also to sustain the disrupters, in addition to influencing or pressuring those in positions of state power.

I like Tyson Yunkaporta's call naming our collective project a "thousand-year clean up."[9] There is no other path, and a weakened US empire is essential for this cleanup to really get going, to last, and to succeed. The good news is that the US empire is already weakening itself—but we need to help it. We can undermine its base by waging major efforts in political education and de-brainwashing—not by propaganda but by relational organizing in actual places around real issues that build Freirian consciousness (opposition to AI data centers, anyone?). By denying and delegitimizing borders, capitalism, transnational corporations, war, corporate technology, surveillance, and liberal (that is, capitalist) democracy itself. By standing in the way of infrastructures of harm: blocking arms shipments, ICE detention facilities, and AI centers, and withdrawing our labor and time when and where necessary. By building true solidarity with the South such as the most recent direct victims of the US in Cuba, Venezuela, Iran, Lebanon, and Palestine, through donations, blockade-busting flotillas, and teaching our communities how we are responsible to these "others." By building new ways of being inside the beast—disrupting and hemorrhaging its fissures while building material and affective autonomy, including through mutual aid and disaster preparedness. We have plenty of tasks at hand to lead to, support, and make best use of the inevitable "social strikes" to come.

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About the Author

Antonio Roman-Alcalá is an educator, researcher, writer, musician, and organizer based in California who has worked on sustainable food systems and radical politics for over twenty years. Antonio is currently an Assistant Professor at California State University East Bay teaching Geography and Environmental Studies, while researching movements for social and environmental justice through agroecology and food sovereignty. His previous efforts include urban farms, civil society alliances, activist-researcher networks, and documentary film-making.

Guy Standing

The idea of social strikes needs clarification. Strikes can be against something, they can be for something, or they can be both. They can take the form of (i) *non-compliance* (raising the costs of operating an unjust system), (ii) *retributive justice* (imposing destructive costs on the classes gaining from an unjust system), or (iii) *transformation* (aimed at overturning an economic structure that is producing systemic injustice).

For a social strike—perhaps *social uprising* would be a better term—to have a high probability of success, it should be motivated by a combination of a politics of *grievance* and a politics of *paradise*. This is analogous to Kuhnian scientific revolutions. They do not just happen. A hegemonic paradigm only collapses when it cannot answer the questions scientists are asking and when there is an alternative credible and desirable paradigm on offer to take its place. Social strikes will rarely succeed without that double character.

Another condition for a high probability of success is that such uprisings should be class-based, again in a double sense. Those leading the uprising should be able to identify the class alliance perpetrating the injustice and be able to identify and appeal to a class alliance that would bring enough coherence to the struggle to overthrow the tyranny.

Jeremy Brecher's interesting opener is mainly about the United States, with reference to a few strikes in other countries. I would like to offer a perspective drawing on British history. All the great social strikes or rebellions over the past thousand years have been class-based and have centered on the defense of the commons. The greatest occurred in 1215–17, during which protests orchestrated by an alliance of commoners and yeomen led to the Charter of the Forest, sealed alongside the Magna Carta. Those charters established the constitutional foundation of all democracies.

That successful social strike was followed by the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, Kett's Rebellion of 1549, the Western Rising of the early seventeenth century, the Levellers of 1648, the Diggers of 1649, the

"blacking" protests of the 1720s, the Chartists of the 1830s, and so on. All in their distinctive way combined a politics of grievance—against class-based deprivation of the commons—with a politics of paradise, of a vision of a more just and democratic alternative.

A feature of most of those social strikes is that they were marked by short-term success, in identifying the injustices they opposed and in establishing the legitimacy of the grievances, but experienced short-term failure with regard to the politics of paradise. However, they had longer-term success, in setting in motion a new forward march.

This reminds me that in early 2016 I had a fortuitous meeting with Henry Kissinger. I asked him if it was true or apocryphal that he had asked Zhou Enlai in in 1971 whether the French Revolution was a success, and that Enlai had replied, "It is too early to tell." Kissinger said it was true; I reserve doubt. The point, of course, is that the success or failure of social uprisings may not be immediate.

What is the relevance of this to our predicament today? In early 2011, I published the book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*.[1] By chance, shortly afterwards the Occupy Movement began across the Western world, and in England what are known as the Tottenham Riots broke out, following the police shooting of a local black man.

The riots scared the middle classes and induced a panicky Director of Public Prosecutions, a certain Keir Starmer, to pressure hastily established courts to act with absurd severity, handing down long prison sentences for trivial offences. The "social strike" was justified on moral grounds, even if the methods were not. But it was brutally suppressed, followed by a withering of the civil commons. There was never a transformative agenda.

As for the Occupy Movement, I participated in a minor way, speaking at several of the venues, and interacted with my friend David Graeber, a committed anarchist, sadly no longer with us. I expressed skepticism over the tactics, orally and in writing. Yes, there was unity around the main grievance (obscene inequality), but there was also a firm belief that there should be no leadership, no direction. There was deliberately no politics of paradise. It was doomed, to be

remembered as little more than collectively letting off steam.

What emanated from all that passion and energy involving millions of protesters? As a Yorkshireman would say, "Nowt." We had Orbán, Trump, Brexit, far-right parties booming, and economic reforms that produced today's *plutarchy*. It is that which should be the target for our politics of grievance now.

A plutarchy may be defined as rule by the super-wealthy in the interests of the super-wealthy, today's class of plutocrats gaining from globalized rentier capitalism. But in order for a plutarchy to come into being, the plutocracy depends on mobilizing a class-based following. In this, it had materially based support from the elite and upper echelons of the salariat, who were gaining from the rising rental income from forms of property.

But in addition, on both sides of the Atlantic, in Latin America as well as in the USA, it has had electoral success by mobilizing what I call the Atavists, the fraction of the precariat that is relatively uneducated and that believes (probably correctly) that the insecurities they are experiencing are worse than what they or their parents experienced Yesterday.

A problem for progressives wanting to see social strikes as the battering ram for democratic renewal and a new forward march is that in 2011, when the Occupy Movement ballooned, the precariat was a Marxian "class-in-the-making," not yet a "class-for-itself." This meant, in brief, they were more united by their sense of relative deprivation and insecurities, by the evident grievances, than by what they wanted instead.

Beyond the Atavists, there were two other factions. First, there were what I have called the Nostalgics, the growing number of migrants in all OECD countries, most drifting into a life of chronic insecurity and few entitlements in mainstream society. They had lost a sense of home. Most could not take the risk of indulging in social uprisings, and, except for occasional days of rage, they had to keep their heads down. The third group are what I call the Progressives, the educated, mostly young, entering the precariat in growing numbers. They went to college

promised a Future, coming out without one worthy of the name.

Social strikes have had a muddled agenda, as in the case of the *gilets jaunes* that briefly flourished in France and a few other countries between 2018 and 2020. Having met with some of them, I can say with confidence that there were as many on the political right as on the left. What came from those sustained social strikes? Nowt.

However, the political configuration is changing rapidly, and potentially in a very positive way, if only the drift towards an authoritarian capitalism with fascist characteristics can be arrested in time. The main reason for cautious optimism is that the precariat has become more of a class for itself.

The size of the Atavists has peaked and is shrinking, growing older and "whiter." Every day, the Progressives grow and have lost any sense of shame at being in the precariat. There is a dignifying pride in declaring membership. This is vital for any social strike. Meanwhile, the Nostalgics are under such duress that many more of them feel they have nothing to lose by becoming active. The "street" is on our side.

However, the prospects of a social uprising still depend on a unifying politics of paradise. The general rule still applies. A transformative uprising with a decent prospect of success must stem from correctly identifying both the "class" opposition and the "class alliance" that must be mobilized to combat it.

Let me conclude with a proposal. Social strikes will have a good prospect of success if they are sectoral in their focus. One of the greatest causes of our political paralysis in the past two decades has been the class capture of what was the education commons. Led by what has happened in the United States, but globally, all layers of what purports to be education have been converted into a neoliberal human capital industry, churning out commodities that include "jobseekers" who enter or re-enter the precariat, while converting more teachers and academics into members of it. By marginalizing the humanities, culture, history, and the arts, seen as having low economic value, the industry is producing more people inclined to support right-wing populism.

Elon Musk said the American education system is designed to produce "mediocrity." But that is the point. As Donald Trump said, "I love the poorly educated." The industry specializes in producing workers for the available jobs and attuned to emotional reactions rather than complex reasoning and respect for truth. It is not just in America. The political right in Europe are joining people like JD Vance in waging a "war on universities," as he put it. The AfD in Germany has openly stated that it intends to remove all progressive teaching.

As argued in my new book, education, not the workplace, has become an existential flashpoint, especially since all layers of education, from pre-school through college and vocational training, are increasingly run by plutocratic finance, by private equity, which is ideologically on the libertarian right.[2]

We need a social strike to challenge the control of education by the plutarchy, led by an alliance of the progressives in the precariat and the educated part of the salariat that has not been indoctrinated by access to the material spoils of today's rentier capitalism. This would combine a politics of grievance with a politics of paradise, a fight for the restoration of empathy, the pursuit of truth, moral virtue, and real democratic governance. It is a social strike that has to be won.

Endnotes

1. I was using the nineteenth-century idea of the dangerous class, as applied to independent artisans and street traders, who rejected both the capitalistic bourgeoisie and the laborism of labor unions. Objectively, the precariat was opposed to neoliberal capitalism and the laborism of social democracy.

2. Guy Standing, *Human Capital: The Tragedy of the Education Commons* (London: Pelican Books, 2026).

About the Author

Guy Standing is Professorial Research Associate at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. He is a Fellow of the British Academy of Social Sciences; co-founder and now honorary co-president of Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN); and Council member of the Progressive Economy Forum. His books include *The Politics of Time: Gaining Control in the Age of Uncertainty*, *A Precariat Charter: From Denizens to Citizens*, *The Corruption of Capitalism: Why Rentiers Thrive and Work Does Not Pay*, *Plunder of the Commons: A Manifesto for Sharing Public Wealth*, and *Battling Eight Giants: Basic Income Now*.

Noha Tarek Hassan

Thank you so much, Jeremy Brecher, for this amazing article.

A key point to remember when thinking about how to organize against the regime in the United States is that, although polling has increasingly shifted against him, Donald Trump won the vote in 2024 and remains popular in large swaths of the Midwest and the South.

How then can we build on this current polling in order to forge a durable majority against Trump?

In my opinion, political campaigns and recruitment must be done in those states where Trump maintains support. We need to change the political culture and attitudes of people in these states. Without that, any future victory might be illusory.

This reminds me of what happened in Egypt. After the 2011 Arab Spring revolution in Egypt, presidential elections took place. The candidates were three so-called "revolutionary" candidates supported by the revolutionary youth, a candidate who was an Islamist belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, and another two candidates who belonged to the overthrown regime, one of whom was a former military man.

Everybody around us seemed to support the revolutionary candidates, and there were great hopes that one of them would win the elections. But to the pained shock of what seemed to be "all" of us, the two candidates who won were the Muslim Brotherhood candidate and the military candidate.

Even though the majority in the big cities like Cairo and Alexandria voted for the revolutionary candidates, the majority of Egyptians who lived in the South chose the Islamist and the military candidates. The revolution and its ideals and spirit didn't extend to the South of Egypt. Revolutionaries, who were and remain a minority in Egypt, focused on protesting and fighting the

police and military in Tahrir Square in Cairo, rather than trying to do extensive and intensive political campaigns to instill the revolutionary ideals and change the security-oriented and religiously driven political culture in the South.

People in the South responded to rhetoric of keeping Egypt safe and stable in the midst of wars and conflicts surrounding it in the Middle East, a rhetoric that was constantly amplified by the military and the overthrown regime. They were also influenced by religious propaganda that emphasized satisfying Allah in their political choices and doing their religious duty of choosing the candidate who will implement the rules of religion in his presidential rule. Revolutionaries were far behind when it came to changing this backward political culture among the majority of Egyptians in order to truly reach the liberal and democratic ideals of the revolution. Similarly, in the US, there has to be a lot of political campaigning work in the South and the Midwest, to radically change the political culture there, so that the people there stop supporting authoritarianism, war, and harsh capitalism in the US.

Since the military coup in 2013, the military has been destroying and trampling on all efforts to re-organize liberal forces in the face of the military regime, such that most of the liberal activists have either been imprisoned or have left Egypt out of fear of being killed or imprisoned. Also, the current war in the Middle East, the use of force by various neighboring regimes against their people, and the Egyptian military's own killing of protesters after the coup all continue to paralyze the Egyptian people in a vicious cycle of worry and fear of doing any political action against the military regime.

Moreover, critical to the success of any effort is that the revolutionary forces have to keep the grit and enthusiasm in their work against the regime. One of the problems of the Occupy Wall Street movement and the Black Lives Matter movement is that they stopped organizing against the regime. The Black Lives Matter movement has organized protests after incidents of police violence, but after a few weeks, they stop protesting. There is no continuously organized effort to change the system by holding regular and constant marches, strikes, and campaigns.

In Egypt, revolutionaries regularly protested (especially on Fridays) against the regime for three years. After the military coup in 2013, and the popular support for it, revolutionaries simply gave up and lost all enthusiasm and grit to keep their work organizing against the regime. This, compounded by the oppression of the military regime and the wars surrounding Egypt in the greater Middle East, made the 2011 revolution fail in Egypt.

What, then, is the path forward? We must continue to work to change conditions from the ground up through teach-ins and face-to-face love of neighbors and one's surrounding circle. This is the simplest and most direct effort that we can all take to transform the system. People are more affected by the political culture of people who are close to them than they are to that of strangers. If every person started to change themself and change the circle of people around them, this change will ultimately spread and consolidate everywhere.

About the Author

Noha Tarek Hassan is a social science researcher studying the interplay of change in political culture and revolution, drawing from her experience as an activist in the Egyptian revolution. Her research reflects Big History perspectives on human cultural evolution and transformation.

Biljana Vankovska

The discussion we are opening about a general strike as a means for societies to resist and overthrow tyranny is as crucial as it is poorly framed. The path toward a shared answer is even more complex. Perhaps the starting point is obvious: Trump 2.0 represents the greatest threat not only to domestic order in the United States but also to global peace. Whenever I have had the opportunity, I have emphasized that we—the rest of the world—cannot stop the American killing machine, and that it operates independently of the political administration. Consider this: today, as we face military, political, economic, energy, and even food crises worldwide, would anything be different if a "Bidenite" (Kamala Harris, for example) were in the White House? My answer is no.

The era (if it ever truly existed) in which elected officials actually held power and decision-making authority has long passed. They are merely incidental puppets of the powerful, the oligarchs, and the owners of the financial and real economies. They do not even organize their own victory galas with personal funds but rely on donations from influential lobbyists. The United States is a garrison state, with 800 military bases around the world upon which our lives depend—including those in China. What we are witnessing now is the metastasis of that system in its final stage.

For those of us from countries where America once seemed the champion of freedom and democracy, it has never been clear why the American citizen not only endures personal impoverishment and pacification but also contributes to the destruction of the world. One would naturally expect democracies to provide lessons in strikes, protests, and the overthrow of tyrannies, based on their own experiences. Instead, many small countries were subjected to externally orchestrated regime changes through colored revolutions and today remain nothing but vassals and colonies. The "exported" experiences from the West have, in practice, destroyed trust in the power of genuine resistance. The doubts run too deep, and the wounds are too painful.

If we set aside the US for a moment, let us look at societies such as Greece or France, whose political cultures are built on demonstrations, strikes, and protest movements. Have these ever truly changed anything, despite their inspiring energy—at least at some moments in time? Germany may be the most striking example within the EU: the resurgence of neo-Nazi tendencies is more visible than ever, accompanied by brutal suppression of any dissident voice.

In the original text framing our discussion, Serbia was cited as a positive example of a society that toppled a tyrant. The truth could not be further from that. Milošević was easy to remove through external intervention and the NGO-ization of resistance. But look at today's Serbia: polarized, confused, absorbed in itself, and without a plan to emerge from chaos. Some colleagues have called it a geopolitical orphan—Trump does not care to overthrow Vučić; on the contrary, they cooperate quite well. There is an opposition, but it does not know what it wants. Meanwhile, the working class is at the level of a dinosaur or an extinct species. The same applies throughout the region.

I write from the perspective of someone from a micro-state—Macedonia, which even changed its name under duress just to join NATO and curry favor with Trump. To our great shame, the political class in Macedonia and the public at large remain silent about Gaza, and now about Iran, as if they have neither voice nor mind. Least of all, conscience. The official stance is clear: we firmly support President Trump's policy. Public opinion in nearly all Balkan countries (except Albania) shows more sympathy for the victims of American policy than for the White House. But only a few individuals dare to raise their voices and resist this monstrous political and military hypnosis—always at personal risk. Students remain silent. Workers are increasingly precarious and are competitors rather than allies, and most are already packing their bags to leave their homeland.

During the era of socialist euphoria—the time of my parents—a partisan and militant song was sung. In the Serbian version, it went: "*Amerika i Engleska biće zemlja proleterska / America and England will be proletarian countries.*" Now translate it into English, and you will see that, as right as Marx was, he could not have foreseen the rise of the military-industrial-media-academia complex (MIMAC) or the weaponization of everything around us—from food to transport to culture.

Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony helps explain the hypnosis of the closed mind, which, even knowing that nothing is right, remains dulled and waits for someone else to save it.

Interestingly, in non-mainstream Western circles, instead of questioning their own responsibility for the world as it is—on the brink of Armageddon—blame is placed elsewhere. The question then arises: Where is China? Why does this most developed and peaceful nation do nothing to save Gaza or Iran? This may be a legitimate topic for another occasion, but here what stands out is the messianic principle. Even the most conscientious and morally good people, horrified by the actions of the US and Israel, fail to recognize their own power. They look for someone with muscles and weapons (or some secret means) to save the world and all of us together.

As a leftist, one thing is clear to me: we have very little time. On the other hand, we need radical transformation—though everyone fears the word "revolution." Personally, I would begin with an open critique of the liberal order, electoral democracy, the multiparty system, and political representation confined to the political sphere (and only among the wealthy). That system is dead. It is more a problem than a solution: it fosters fragmentation in society, confrontation within the working class, and the mirage of illusory change.

Some of my comrades have united around the International Coalition for Peace, which gathers several hundred peace initiatives and organizations from around the world. Its platform reads, "*Peace is what unites us, regardless of our ideological or other differences*." Yet the problem arises when we have to define what peace truly is. Howard Zinn was right when he said society suffers from too much obedience, not from protests. Today, even protests are a cacophony: we know what we do not want, but we do not know what we do want. In such circumstances, unity is easiest to achieve if a "tyrant" is found—regardless of name or origin.

I do not want to end on a pessimistic note. So, here is a deal: In today's Hamletian moment, awaken to your domestic social and class struggles—but do not forget the military-industrial complexes, barracks, and academies. We—the rest of the world—must deliberately focus on all US military bases and the Western embassies that control our internal affairs. Only later might

there be time to deliberate on the new world we want to build together and what true, positive peace really means.

A final word to my colleagues—peace researchers from the West: rethink your frameworks. Too often, your theories and methods serve to preserve the social and class status quo, rather than imagining new possibilities that genuinely serve global society. It is time for knowledge to match the urgency of the world's crises.

About the Author

Biljana Vankovska is Professor of International Relations and Peace Studies at Saints Cyril and Methodius University. She has been a pioneer in peace and conflict studies in Macedonia. Vankovska has been a Guest Senior Research Fellow at Copenhagen Peace Research Institute (COPRI), a faculty member at European Peace University in Stadschlaining, and a Senior Fellow at the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF). She is an International Advisor of the Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Studies (TFF) in Lund. She holds a PhD in philosophy from Saints Cyril and Methodius University.

Author Response

I would like to thank the contributors for the time and attention they have paid to this discussion. I appreciate the positive. I also appreciate those who have disagreed and criticized the piece, and I have learned from them.

These comments respond to a 2,600-word excerpt from a 12,000-word report, so it is understandable that they include some misinterpretations. Anyone who wants to know more about who I am and where I am coming from can read the full report and find more than they could possibly want to know at www.jeremybrecher.org.

The purpose of my piece "Society on Strike: A Last Defense Against Tyranny?" was to consider how to slow and reverse the ongoing fascist takeover of the United States. It was striking to see how few of the responses addressed this question. While few denied that such a takeover was under way, few (other than those who endorsed my proposals regarding social strikes) presented much in the way of an alternative strategy to overcome it.

In many of these essays, there is a strange complacency, bordering on acquiescence, toward the fascist takeover. It is no endorsement of Clinton, Obama, or Biden to point this out. Some maintained that the ascendency of Trump and MAGA would not have any worse results than a return to the status quo ante. I recommend that anyone who feels that way talk to some Iranians who have lost loved ones in the recent bombings, trans folks whose very identity is being criminalized in the US, and working-class Americans who have to put gas in their cars to get to work.

The most frequent criticism of "Society on Strike" is that its intent is to restore conditions that existed prior to Trump. My phrase "establish or reestablish democracy," criticized in several essays, was carefully chosen to be inclusive of those who, like myself, believe a radical transformation of

society is necessary and those whose aspirations are more modest. It is hard to see how Trumpian tyranny can be overcome without both.

My report on "Social Strikes" recognized and addressed the complex problem of combining a struggle against a tyranny with the need for social transformation that goes far beyond that specific goal:

> In many social strikes against tyrannies the unifying goal, often reduced to a single demand, is removal of the top government officials from office. In many situations such a demand may be the best or even the only way to develop the unified power necessary to overcome an authoritarian ruler. However, as a study of popular uprisings over the 2010s indicates, such a narrow demand can leave a successful uprising with little consensus about how to go forward from initial success. Or it can simply restore a less terrible but still unsatisfactory status quo ante. The drive for unity around one or limited specific goals needs to be combined with vigorous discussion of longer-range programs by constituent elements of the social strike coalition. A good example of how to do this was provided by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions and other major unions which declared a general strike against president Yoon Suk-yeol's attempted martial law coup, while also demonstrating for "Beyond Yoon" demands for just working conditions and public policies to ensure quality public services for all Koreans.

It is nice that so many contributions to this forum recognize the dire conditions we face and that many assert that a vision of what we need is necessary. But that call is repeatedly used to indicate that action against "barbarization" must await such as unifying vision. I would underline the statement that "In today's fractured hyper-complex world, such a shared vision may not emerge anytime soon: it makes more sense to look for the multiplicity or constellation of visions, and explore the landscape of commonalities or common humanity, and pathways to mobilize them."

Moreover, we need more robust discussion on how to turn such visions into reality given the present crisis. I share the wish for a better world, but we need to go beyond just wishing toward developing strategy, a mediation of means and ends, to get there.

Nothing could better illustrate the use of social strikes against MAGA tyranny than the mobilizations over the past few months in Minneapolis and other cities. "Hundreds of thousands of people in Chicago, Minneapolis, and St. Paul organized themselves into nonviolent neighborhood, workplace, union, faith, and civil resistance groups. They trained. They organized. And they acted with great discipline and bravery in confronting Trump's gestapo-in-training."

People can choose to stand aside from such action and just hope for a better world. But there is an alternative: "We have plenty of tasks at hand, to lead to, support, and make best use of the inevitable 'social strikes' to come."

About the Author

Jeremy Brecher is a historian of social movements and a co-founder of the Labor Network for Sustainability. He is the author of the *Climate Insurgency Trilogy* and *Common Preservation in a Time of Mutual Destruction*.